

"Russia of the Mind": languages in the Cold War

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‘RUSSIA OF THE MIND’: LANGUAGES IN THE COLD WAR

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As the Second World War grew to a close, public interest in the Soviet Union was high: the Eastern Counties Committee for Adult Education in the Forces had mounted nearly 1000 lectures on the USSR, and numbers beginning to study the language in technical colleges had grown so much – 300 candidates in one year for the RSA (Royal Society of Arts) Russian exams – that institutions were finding it difficult to provide staff to meet the demand.¹ This enthusiasm for Russian language and culture was reflected at an official level too. The Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, told Parliament in late 1944, that he and Churchill had discussed with Stalin the need for,

contacts between our two countries on a literary and a language basis. There is no doubt that a very great effort is being made in Russia today in the teaching of English, and we have to get going to see that we do not drop far behind in a comparable effort on our part.²

The Foreign Office Sub-Committee set up to investigate the state of Russian language competence in Britain concluded however that there were considerable obstacles in the way of developing more teaching in the language. As well as the evident shortage of teachers, the Sub-Committee noted that attempts to give students direct cultural contact with the country were frustrated: “The difficulty of obtaining a regular and prompt supply of current publications from the USSR was recognised as one of the main obstacles to the free development of Russian studies in Britain”. The only approach seemed to be to appoint someone to the British Embassy in Moscow with the specific task of finding out what books were being published, and then getting access to them. Proposals from the British to establish exchange arrangements with the Soviet Union in order to facilitate student travel between the two countries had not yet been implemented by the middle of 1946.³ The Report’s major recommendations therefore centred on increasing the numbers able to teach Russian by drawing on ex-servicemen with language skills, and beginning to introduce Russian into the secondary school curriculum. In practice, the tone of many of these recommendations on developing Russian language teaching was however at the general level of exhortation and encouragement, like the Minister of Education’s letter to schools emphasising the merits of experimental two year intensive sixth form courses in the language.⁴

By the beginning of the 1950s however, there was a major change in the tenor of the discussion. The responsibility for developing Russian language competence shifted from the Foreign Office to the War Office, and exhortation and encouragement were replaced by a national language policy, whose initial target was to train 3,784 Russian linguists.⁵ In fact, by the time the policy was finally abandoned in 1960, some 5,000 men had received intensive Russian tuition. This chapter will explore the ways in which a Russian language policy was developed in the UK in response to the deepening Cold War, and the very particular learning experiences of the men involved. The framework in which the Russian programme was set positioned language learning as a quasi-secret activity in which the learners themselves would become part of an arsenal designed to fight the Cold War. These men would attain very high levels of competence in the Russian language through a teaching programme in which the USSR itself, and its culture, were almost entirely absent. As one participant remembered, it was as if they were learning the language of a country which had no real contemporary existence.⁶

Cold War language learning policy

The immediate post war positioning of Russian teaching as a means of developing cultural contact was rapidly overtaken by a discourse of Russian language for war which represented language-training as an integral part of emergency preparations for a future conflict with the USSR. A Government War Book of the Cold War set out the steps the country would have to take in order to get itself onto a proper war footing. The Defence Transition Committee, chaired by the Cabinet Secretary, started to oversee detailed war preparations. By early 1949, Russian language teaching had become a key part of these developing war plans, with its own specially designated sub committee:

To investigate the war-time requirements in linguists, particularly in the Russian and Slavonic tongues, and advise on the methods to be adopted to procure and train in peacetime the number that are likely to be required.⁷

The vocabulary with which the mounting fear and distrust of the USSR was expressed was one strongly influenced by the discursive patterns of the preceding war. Thus, each of the services was asked to estimate how many Russian and Slavonic linguists they would need over two distinct phases: D Day and “within the first twelve months of war”. A plethora of sub committees, from the Ministry of Defence to the Services and Joint Intelligence Committee, became actively involved in discussing the linguistic implications of this new Cold War. As one participant waspishly observed: “there are at present too many people calling too many meetings on this subject”.⁸

In this context of anticipated imminent war, the world was divided up linguistically, as well as geographically, into allies and enemies. Naval Intelligence pointed out that whilst there were other languages that might prove necessary in war, their importance was expected to be slight in comparison with that of Russian:

The Eastern European satellite countries have no great naval importance. In war they would probably function under Russian leadership. The only likely naval requirements would be for the interrogation of prisoners of war and translation of captured documents.... In the Far East, if China and some of the Malay speaking countries joined Russia, there might be a requirement for interpreters and translators in Cantonese, Mandarin and Malay.⁹

The Sub Committee on war-time requirements in linguists therefore directed most of its attention to the provision of Russian speakers for future deployment in battle arenas or intelligence activities: “...general interpretership duties, ... the interrogation of prisoners of war, the scrutiny of captured documents, and the ...contribution to GCHQ”.¹⁰ Estimates of the numbers required to fulfil these duties were high. The Navy alone argued that it would need 333 language specialists for D Day, and another 500 within the first twelve months of war, against a current complement of only twenty. In 1951, the total requirement for all the services combined (quite apart from the Government Communications Headquarters, GCHQ) was being put at 3,784.¹¹ With the dearth of already trained and available Russian speakers, the authorities were faced with what was in effect a linguistic emergency:

The existing resources of reliable Russian linguists for service under HM Government in the event of war are hopelessly inadequate...The problem is a large one: the requirement is unanimously described by the Intelligence Services as essential; the solution is inevitably expensive.¹²

In early discussions about how the considerable gap between projected demand and current supply of Russian linguists was to be met, financial considerations loomed large. The cheapest and quickest option, it was argued, might be to draft in some of the Russian speaking foreigners who could be found among the legions of displaced people currently in Europe: 18,000 Ukrainian ex Prisoners of War for example, it was suggested; 10,000 Ukrainians from the former Polish forces; 1,000 former members of the Red Army who had come over in 1942; 27,000 Balts, and so on.¹³ The Joint Intelligence Committee however sharply responded that this sort of linguistic talent was totally unacceptable. To begin with, the Committee argued, it would be extremely difficult to vet such candidates because of the paucity of available information about displaced persons and refugees. Secondly, in the event of war, the Government might well be forced by public opinion to intern aliens. Above all, people who had been born in a country outside the UK were seen by the Committee as unknown, and potentially destabilising entities: “An alien, whether naturalised or not, working for a country at war with his own, would have unpredictable reactions”. It was feared that such non British-born linguists would be ineffective in interrogating Prisoners of War, because prisoners might well refuse to talk to people they saw as traitors. With friends or relations in war zones, non British-born Russian speakers could find themselves subject to coercion by enemy agents. The very presence of aliens inside the British war-machine might anyway make it easier, it was thought, for an enemy to plant spies and agents.¹⁴ The conclusion of all this was that the Russian linguists needed for the Cold War struggle would have to be British-born.

Given this stipulation, and the perceived urgency of the situation, the only solution was for the country to train a new cadre of British Russian-speakers on an accelerated course. The authorities accordingly looked towards the only pool of potential learners who were at that time British-born, available, and who would be signing the Official Secrets Act: “the main source of supply must be national servicemen. It is proposed, with the assistance of the Ministry of Labour, to select volunteers for training on their entry into the service”.¹⁵ For the first time, the services agreed to combine their efforts in a Joint Services School of Linguists (JSSL) in order to teach Russian *ab initio* to men who would be joining up under national service. The School was to train two classes of Russian linguists: first class translators, needed for conference work, important interrogations, key documents; and

second class translators whose role would be in signals intelligence work, and in monitoring enemy broadcasts and transmissions. The latter, approximately 1,200 per year, would be trained for 12 months in two newly established schools, at camps in Bodmin and Coulsdon (and later in Crail). From these recruits, first class translators would be selected (an estimated 450 per year) for an additional 12 month course at Cambridge University (for Army/RAF recruits), and at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES), in London, for naval personnel. The provisional figure for the cost of this highly intensive national language programme in 1951 was £855,000.¹⁶ The scheme as a whole was framed within the context of a “national service”, with an obligatory commitment for trainees to be retained as a mobilisable reserve of linguists in their subsequent civilian lives. For the three and a half years after they had been demobbed for example, it was expected that the higher grade linguists would be attending compulsory refresher courses – normally three courses of fifteen days each – in order to keep their Russian up to a usable standard.¹⁷

The language programme was designed from the outset to promote the idea that intensive tuition and hard work would produce the desired result in Russian competence: “The idea should...be consistently conveyed that the learning of Russian is not as difficult as it appears” (Elliott & Shukman 2002,71). A Ministry of Defence Progressing Committee, established to set up the details of the programme, and monitor its development, proposed a syllabus for the two groups of learners which would provide for a notional ‘A’ level/first degree equivalent competence after nine months’ study, and a final year degree standard after a further 12 months. The curriculum laid particular emphasis for the first group on the passive/receptive skills which trainees would be called upon to use in listening stations, intercepting enemy messages: “taking down fairly fast dictation from a variety of voices e.g. telephone conversations; translating documents from Russian into English where the strictest accuracy is not essential”, with the aim of achieving an active vocabulary of 3,000-3,500 words, including technical military terms. For the second group, with higher Russian language skills, the curriculum would aim to produce a, “fluent and competent grasp of the language”, in order to prepare trainees to operate as interpreters in conferences and interrogations, and provide the linguistic support which might be needed on the ground if enemy camps, airfields or installations were going to be taken over in the event of war.¹⁸

With Russian positioned as an integral part of emergency preparations for war, the language programme was activated in record time: in the first two months of 1952, Bodmin was readied for 500 students, and Coulsdon 400, whilst Cambridge and London had already registered 100 and 25 trainees respectively by then.¹⁹ Arrangements were made to continue the training programme uninterrupted if war did actually break out. The Director of Naval Intelligence warned that: “the schools must continue during war, or emergency, to provide replacements for wastage, including casualties and to meet additional commitments that are bound to arise”.²⁰ At the beginning of 1953, discussions were held with the Director of SSEES about emergency evacuation arrangements which might have to be put in place in order to ensure that the Russian course could carry on even if the international situation suddenly deteriorated.²¹

Learning Russian in the Cold War

Elizabeth Hill, the charismatic director of the Cambridge branch of the programme, had suggested that, since it would be both cruel to the men concerned, and a gross waste of public money to select unsuitable candidates, learners should be chosen who were motivated, had considerable powers of concentration, good health, and a School Certificate in Latin or another foreign language (Elliott & Shukman 2002, 47). A high proportion of the early trainees were in fact already graduates, or men who were expecting to go on to university after national service, although as the programme developed over time, the balance shifted somewhat towards able, often grammar school educated young men, who might not automatically have gone into higher education. Potential recruits heard about the Russian programme in a variety of ways. Suitable volunteers might be asked at their initial national service medical – “Do you speak any languages?”²² – or were told that getting into their preferred service, or obtaining a commission, would only be possible if they were prepared to sign on for the Russian course.²³ In some cases, conscripts had found out about the programme even before they left school, and were primed to mention it in their first interviews with the services. Notices posted in barracks²⁴ attracted other volunteers who had already embarked on basic army training.²⁵ The system, as it developed, selected four groups of national servicemen per year, and sent them off to a Russian course in batches – in February, May, August and November – after they had completed their basic national service training. Few of the young men recruited seemed to have made the connection between learning Russian and imminent war which evidently existed in the official mind. Although Michael Frayn remembered being warned that he should not regard getting on the course as an opportunity to skive because he, “might be dropped behind enemy lines”,²⁶ others claimed that, as 18 or 19 year olds, they seldom thought about why the course for which they were being selected was actually being run –

“the reality never hit one”²⁷ – and when it did occur to them that there might be a link between learning Russian and fighting a war, they, “never felt that it would come to it”²⁸.

Once enrolled on the course, national servicemen found themselves in a learning environment which was structured and highly demanding: “learning a foreign language with an intensity and total involvement which took over my whole person....As baptisms go, it was total immersion” (Drummond 2000,57). A sample day’s timetable at Bodmin or Coulsdon would start off with an hour’s grammar drill (reading phrases and exercises aloud in chorus), followed by an hour’s grammar instruction, forty-five minutes Russian reading and oral practice, forty-five minutes translating from Russian to English (orally and then in writing), three quarters of an hour translating Russian into English, Russian dictation, a thirty-minute lecture in Russian, and ninety minutes of translation, finally rounding off the day with thirty minutes learning new words from vocabulary lists. The discipline was intense. Students were subjected to regular tests which, if failed, could result in them being expelled from the course, and returned to normal service life. In effect this meant not only going back to a less intellectually stimulating life in barracks, but also probably losing any commission they might have been given, and becoming liable to be sent overseas for service, in Korea for example. Students for the longer twelve month courses at Cambridge and London were selected from the results of the second major test, on the basis of scores of over 75%. Elliott and Shukman describe one of these exams, after approximately six/eight weeks of tuition, as comprising translation into English from an H.G. Wells story, and from an autobiography of the mountaineer Sherpa Tensing; translation into Russian of a potted biography of Albert Einstein; and grammar sentences for translation like, “The little village which was surrounded on all sides by the advancing Soviet units underwent many heavy air raids” (Elliott & Shukman 2002,71-72).

To arrive at these results, the overall teaching philosophy was a mixture of the more traditional grammar drilling and translation, evident in the timetable, and newer direct teaching methods. It was expected that wherever possible Russian would be the medium of instruction. Indeed for some recruits, their very first experience of the language was of an hour-long lecture on Russian geography, delivered in Russian, with repetitions and considerable use of sign language: “We began to realise, almost with disbelief, that although we knew none of the words..., we were understanding the sense.” (Elliott & Shukman 2002,71). The class group of around thirty students was regularly split into smaller syndicates, and learners were also given one to one oral practice. Role plays were used to give potential interpreters an opportunity to practise:

A Russian woman calls to say that her husband has apparently been arrested in the British sector of Berlin for black market activities; Colonel Karateev calls to say that the Russian Food Committee would be interested in arranging on behalf of German civilians in the Russian sector of Berlin the purchase from the British authorities of any surplus salt herring....²⁹

For those on the course, learning Russian in this way was a total experience – “it became a way of life. You ate and slept Russian” – ³⁰ characterised by an intensive work rate which many ex-servicemen felt they would never match in the rest of their lives: “Never worked so hard in my life”; ‘a real sense of earnestness’.³¹ For a few of the students, the strain was simply too much, and they took to alcohol, or faded away from the programme (Drummond 2000, 58). As a cohort, Russian learners were clearly seen by much of the rest of the services as a group apart: “Fall out the Russians!”³² Given the amount of time committed to language-learning, these men clearly had to leave out swathes of the general training which other national servicemen received. Mark Frankland noted that Russian students were looked upon in the Navy as, “undesirable and unconvincing sailors”, and “egghead midshipmen”.³³ Those on the Russian course were in a sense both in the services – called up, and working within a hierarchical structure – and outside the services. On the Cambridge course for instance, students wore demob suits issued to them on their arrival, rather than military/RAF uniforms, but still stayed detached from the life of the town and university, living altogether in hostels outside the city-centre, originally in Newmarket and Foxton.³⁴ In this situation of intense work within a relatively small and isolated group, cohorts of national servicemen-learners tended to develop a particular in-between collective identity. They seemed more like undergraduates than soldiers, but unlike university students, the pattern of their studies and their major choices had already been set for them. They had to work within a tightly controlled structure which gave them little freedom of manoeuvre, and no option other than to study: “like being at university with none of the responsibilities”.³⁵ In this context, they functioned as a tightly-knit community, with their own corporate extra-mural activities, mostly Russian-related. Choirs were formed, plays were put on in Russian, and a Russian magazine, *Samovar*, was produced, half in Russian, and half in English, with poetry, short stories, reviews and School in-jokes (Elliott & Shukman 2002, 111-116). Some participants regarded the learner experience as akin to what they

knew, or imagined to be, the slightly inbred community of a boarding school,³⁶ with a tendency to give nicknames to all concerned, and to resist those in authority by sharing jokes at their expense. Michael Frayn for example described how groups of students would tease instructors by agreeing among themselves to deliberately speak Russian with an English accent.³⁷

The relatively hermetic environment in which Russian was being taught was further emphasised by the security framework within which the programme had been established. The commandant of the Joint Services School at Bodmin was instructed to impress upon all students,

the need for security and the dangers of careless talk. The chief points upon which security must be assured are the size and timing of the scheme, and the tasks upon which these men may ultimately be employed.³⁸

The Joint Intelligence Committee, whilst accepting that it would soon be general knowledge that the government was training national servicemen in Russian, argued that it was important to ensure that precise information on the scheme itself did not enter the public domain. Memoranda on the progress of the programme therefore deleted details of how many students were actually being trained, and how long the initiative was expected to last.³⁹ As well as the danger of secret information leaking out to the enemy, there was also the possibility that the enemy might succeed in penetrating the courses themselves, and the authorities were therefore exhorted to exercise constant vigilance:

You are particularly warned of the need for security and it is your especial duty to watch for any signs of political disaffection or subversive activities in the civilian teaching staff and to report any suspicion at once through the unit security officer to the Commandant.⁴⁰

Although the JSSL operation certainly employed teachers who were British, the dearth of fluent Russian speakers in the UK inevitably meant that the majority of the staff were going to be non British-born. All of these Russian-speaking foreigners had to be screened by the security services before being recommended as teachers: as early as May 1951, the Home Office had been through the records of 5,000 potential candidates.⁴¹ The vetting exercise was in itself problematic. In the wake of the enormous displacement of populations which had followed the Second World War, the concept of one fixed nationality was in flux. From the Cambridge course for example, Elizabeth Hill reported that she was going to employ staff who were variously described as: "nationality none - Russian by birth; naturalised British - Russian by birth; and undetermined - previously Russian".⁴² Although they understood that it was desirable to have "real Russians from the USSR" teaching on the course, the authorities had in practice found it difficult to identify such people. The Anglo-Russian families who had come over at the time of the Revolution, and whom the Ministry of Defence had initially felt to be the most reliable source of instructors, were by now becoming depleted.⁴³ More recent émigrés were difficult to identify either because they had not always registered their nationality as Russian, or because those who were found by the authorities were simply not literate enough to be teachers, or were officially considered to be security risks.⁴⁴ In the end, the courses were staffed overwhelmingly by non-British teachers, coming from a range of Eastern European countries, including Russia. In one course at Bodmin for example, out of fifty-six civilian lecturers, only eight were British, with the rest coming from Russia/Soviet Union (twenty-two), Poland (fifteen), Latvia (six), the Ukraine (two), Estonia (one), Czechoslovakia (one), and no state/'stateless' (one) (Elliott & Shukman 2002, 67).

In this situation, students learnt Russian in what was to British eyes at the time a highly cosmopolitan context, dominated by foreigners from a variety of countries. A persistent theme of participants' memories of this period is of the unusual and dynamic multinational staff who taught them – "different grades of émigrés", "electric teachers", "exotic collection of people".⁴⁵ For young British people in the early 1950s, this close contact with foreigners was in itself unusual. Added to this were the romantic backgrounds from which so many of the émigrés came - landed gentry, princes, diplomats - and the extraordinary life stories they were able to recount. Martin Gilbert for example recalled how one of his Latvian instructors told the class how he had been taken by the German occupation forces to Katyn, the site of the murder of thousands of Polish officers, in order to demonstrate that it was a Soviet, rather than a Nazi atrocity (Elliott & Shukman 2002, 76).

In their language lessons, JSSL students became aware that the Russian they were learning came from multiple, and very different sources. The social and attitudinal distinctions between Russian and Soviet émigré teachers were first manifested in their discernibly different accents:

Servicemen, who had the advantage of daily oral classes with native speakers in small groups, often found two kinds of instructors in Russian and two accents, the older pre-revolutionary generation and those who had lived under the Soviet regime⁴⁶

whilst Polish teachers appeared to have a notably softer accent when speaking Russian.⁴⁷ Very soon, students became party to the considerable political and cultural tensions among their teaching staff, “the pecking order” which seemed to establish itself in relation to the point at which teachers had originally left Russia, for example: 1917, or the early 1920s, or the late 1920s at the time of collectivisation, or in the 1930s’ years of Stalinist terror, or in the immediate post war population displacement (Drummond 2000, 60). Outside the classes too, the mixture of émigré accents framed what little leisure time the students enjoyed, since those designing the courses had decreed that as much of barracks’ life as was feasible should be dominated by the Russian language :” It is desirable to create a Russian speaking environment as far as possible. Thus the cadets’ mess might have a Russian-speaking staff”.⁴⁸ In any case, many of the foreign staff spoke English rather idiosyncratically, so that socialising with them, even in an Anglophone context, did not necessarily diminish their essential foreignness as far as the young students were concerned. Years later, graduates from the course remembered the exotic theatricality of some teachers – poetry-reading groups, accompanied by wine and cigarettes; ex-princes who carried gold-topped canes; former Polish cavalry officers who insisted on teaching the servicemen Tsarist drinking songs; orthodox priests; an ex-commandant of the Tsar’s personal aircraft, and so on. As David Marquand suggested, ” the instructors made a bigger and more lasting impression on me than anything else” (Elliott & Shukman 2002,75).

The “osmotic absorption” of the atmosphere of Russia to which graduates from the course so often refer⁴⁹ was thus the atmosphere of a very particular sort of Russia, a country in fact made up of exiles from all over Eastern Europe. The teachers were people who, in John Wain’s words, had “lost much”,⁵⁰ and whose identities were strongly framed by the experience of exile, neither relating easily to the contemporary situation of the lands which they had left, nor to the British state to which they had come, and to which they had, by virtue of their present teaching positions, implicitly vowed allegiance. For those being taught, the teachers carried with them the,”sadness of homelessness...They tried to live and get back to cooking a bit of borscht for lunch and driving these words into us and hearing their language mutilated” (Elliott & Shukman 2002, 75). In all senses, the Russia represented by the course was eccentric, a landscape which did not exist in the USSR of the 1950s, and which was totally alien to the British environment in which it was now placed: “in a remote part of England...a sort of Russia in exile” had been created (Drummond 2000, 61).

This Russia in exile was one in which the shared poetry and literature of the great inherited Russian tradition was of major importance (Woodhead 2005, 54). Besides regular play and poetry readings, students would take part in a Russian play – *Hamlet* or *Othello* in Russian translation, the *Cherry Orchard*, *Three Sisters*, *The Inspector General*. The Cambridge course in particular had a strongly literary tone, with servicemen reading Pushkin’s *Queen of Spades*, Lermontov’s *A Hero of our Time*, and even an edition of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. Remembering this period in their lives, it is often, “the profound enjoyment of opening the door to Russian literature and Russian attitudes to life”, that ex-students most easily recall (Drummond 2000, 66). In comparison, their contact with contemporary life in the USSR was strictly limited. It was clearly impossible for learners to spend any study time in the foreign country itself. Indeed, the only foreign residence that could have been arranged would have been in another form of exile Russia, staying with émigré Russian families in Paris for example, which the services had sometimes organised for a few regular officers before the JSSL initiative. Students remembered that they were given occasional copies of *Pravda*, or that outside speakers with an up to date knowledge of the USSR, like the *Observer* Russian correspondent for example, were invited down to speak to them.⁵¹ Michael Frayn recalled being given Soviet novels to read for language practice,⁵² and Soviet propaganda films like *Meeting on the Elbe*, were also available to see. On the whole however, despite early syllabus drafts which had prescribed a lecture once a week by a visiting expert on the contemporary Soviet system,⁵³ there did not seem to have been any very systematic move to give students access to the admittedly scant information which existed about current society in the USSR.⁵⁴ Up to date reports about life in the Soviet Union were desperately difficult to obtain: John Drummond recalled watching a slide lecture given by two American students who were among the first who had actually been able to visit the country.⁵⁵

Over the whole programme, there was little formal effort to indoctrinate students about the Cold War enemy whose language they were learning with such commitment. To some extent, the perception that the Soviet system was inimical to the West seemed to be a given, something taken for granted, and therefore not needing to be mentioned.⁵⁶ Whilst however there was little political discussion in the classroom – with students perhaps reluctant to ask personal questions about how their lecturers had arrived in this exile situation - the anti-Soviet bias of the majority of the foreign teachers was clearly implicit. In practice, this extraordinary group of Eastern European men and women who had left, or been driven out of their own countries, embodied the effects that a political system might have upon its members. As Mark Frankland expressed it, “By their presence there, they were a political line”.⁵⁷

Conclusions

The termination of the JSSL Russian-learning programme coincided with the end of the 1950s. In the course of the decade, the Second World War discourse which had originally framed the initiative – a single and clearly defined enemy, to be fought on an emergency war-footing – began to change radically. By the late 1950s, the context of imminent Cold War was beginning to be perceived by policymakers as just one of several possible scenarios which also included “Limited War”, and “Global War”.⁵⁸ The prospect of Global War, whose implications were examined by the Government in frightening detail after the explosion of the H Bomb, clearly challenged the whole register in which Cold War language policy had been framed. The scale of such a war, the destruction and losses, and the speed with which nuclear holocaust would result, served to relativise the rhetoric of D Day and 12 months after on which Russian language policy had been predicated. The linguistic demands of Global War went well beyond what the Ministry of Defence could reasonably plan for, although the Language Training Committee did note that some consideration would have to be given to the linguistic implications of, “the survival phase of a global war”.⁵⁹

“Limited War” on the other hand posed a number of disparate language demands, occasioned by the various decolonisation conflicts in which the country was becoming progressively embroiled in the mid to late 1950s. The range of languages needed to meet this situation was much wider than Russian, and the Committee indeed noted that the country had:

insufficient trained officers and other rank speakers for duty in the various parts of the world where British forces are stationed....in recent emergencies, eg Cyprus and Suez, it has been difficult to find enough trained language speakers.⁶⁰

In this scenario, the armed services argued that they would all have rather different linguistic requirements, depending upon which colonial conflict was occupying their attention at any one time, so that the notion of joint language planning, as had occurred with the JSSL and Russian, was no longer valid.⁶¹ In addition, with the declared end of national service set at 1960, an already expensive centralised Russian language teaching programme seemed likely to be even less cost-effective. Greater and more disparate linguistic demands, and reduced manpower and budgetary resources, sounded the death knell for the Russian-teaching initiative.

The programme represented the largest and most concerted national languages policy which the British authorities had ever undertaken, unmatched incidentally in the fifty years which followed its demise. Some 5,000 adults had been taught a foreign language *ab initio* in well-organised and highly successful courses, and the effect on the future lives and careers of these Russian-learners, and on the teaching of Russian in UK universities, was, in many instances, remarkable. Students had learnt under extremely intensive conditions, cut off from their peers, in an experience which fostered a collective in-between type of identity, one neither typical of barracks, nor of university, somewhat similar in group ethos to that of a boarding school. Unlike a boarding school however, the JSSL learning experience was dominated by its largely foreign teaching staff, people who were in most cases exiles from countries across Eastern Europe – the USSR, Poland, Latvia, the Ukraine, Estonia, Czechoslovakia – and who brought with them a variety of life-stories marked by loss and past glories. The experience of Russia that the national servicemen were given was thus one which was centred on exile and tradition, rather than upon the contemporary state of the USSR. They were in a very real way learning the language of Russia outside the context of its contemporary usage, distanced from direct experience both by the structure in which they operated and by the teachers who mediated the foreign language to them. Those men who went on from Coulsdon or Bodmin to work in one of the many RAF Signals Listening Stations in Germany certainly heard the language of Russian servicemen at it was currently being spoken, but they still continued to be distanced from any direct contact with those who spoke it, “engulfed in a torrent of Russian chatter...logging scattered exchanges about course and altitude, requests for landing, reports on fuel levels” (Woodhead 2005, 103). Any direct experience of Russia was still extremely rare. If, in the years immediately after the course, ex-JSSL students did manage to get into the USSR, the structure within which such visits had to be organised could serve to make the experience as distancing and alienating as that of listening in to Russian conversation in wireless stations.⁶² Any attempts by Soviet nationals to meet and befriend former students on the course were treated with considerable suspicion by the authorities, in a context in which direct contact was seen by both sides as part of an elaborate and mysterious Cold War spying game.

The JSSL initiative had been formulated in the crucible of Cold War, as an urgent response to the perceived threat of attack from the USSR. The Russia that it mediated through its language courses was a Russia which had, by the 1950s, largely been lost, a Russia of the past, beyond the reach of those exiles who taught it, and kept alive by them through its language, and through its glorious tradition of

literature and culture. This was inevitably a long way away from the contemporary political and social realities of the USSR in the 1950s. As John Drummond suggested, learning Russian at JSSL, one was living in a country which did not in practice exist, in effect, 'a Russia of the mind'.⁶³

¹ Summary report of Foreign Office(FO) Russian Studies Committee's Executive Sub-Committee up to July 1946, Elizabeth Hill Archive, University of Cambridge (hereafter Hill), SLAV1/A1/1-107.

² Hansard, Volume 1, 406, no, 3, 1 December 1944, Columns 292, 293.

³ Summary report of FO Russian Studies Committee's Executive Sub-Committee, up to July 1946, Hill, SLAV1/A1/1-107.

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¹⁵ NA ADM 116/6331, 'Service Requirements', 2 March 1951.

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¹⁷ NA Air2/13255, 1st Meeting of Language Sub- Committee of CAMC, 19 November, 1956.

¹⁸ NA ADM 116/6333, MOD Progressing Committee for the training of Russian linguists, 16 August, 1951.

¹⁹ NA ADM 116/6331, MOD Progressing Committee for the training of Russian linguists, 14 August 1951; 4 January 1952.

²⁰ NA ADM 116/6331, Director of Naval Intelligence, 23 October, 1952.

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²² Testimony, Drummond, IWM 26570.

²³ Testimony Peter Woodthorpe, IWM 26574, recorded 1986; Testimony John Wain, IWM 26569, recorded 1986.

²⁴ Testimony Naky Doniach, IWM 26573, recorded 1986.

²⁵ Testimony Alan Bennett, IWM 26567, recorded 1986.

²⁶ Testimony Michael Frayn, IWM 26566, recorded 1986.

²⁷ Testimony Woodthorpe, IWM 26574.

²⁸ Testimony Wain, IWM 26569.

²⁹ Scripted interruptions, undated, Hill, SLAV 1/ D4/11; D4/12.

³⁰ Testimony Wain, IWM 26569.

³¹ Testimony Drummond, IWM 26570; Testimony Wain, IWM 26569.

³² Testimony Wain, IWM 26569.

³³ Testimony Frankland, IWM 26572, recorded 1986.

³⁴ Testimony Bennett, IWM 26567.

³⁵ Testimony Bennett, IWM 26567. See also, Testimony Frankland, IWM 26572.

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⁴⁶ M. Lee, 'The Joint Services School for Linguists', *The Linguist*, Vol. 38, no.4, 1999.

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⁵² Testimony Frayn, IWM 26566.

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